

## **Focus on Bristol Bay: Tribal Engagement**

With 229 tribes, 19 distinct language areas and six distinct cultural regions, Alaska Native tribes are a significant presence in the state. Alaska Natives have lived in Alaska for thousands of years and their connection to the land and dependence on it are factors EPA regularly takes into consideration when working on Alaska environmental issues.

EPA's commitment to working with Alaska Native villages and tribal governments is especially important as the agency conducts its watershed assessment encompassing the rivers, lakes and wetlands of the Nushagak and Kvichak watersheds in Bristol Bay. EPA launched this assessment in response to federally recognized tribes and others who expressed concern about large-scale mining in Bristol Bay and its impacts to subsistence resources, particularly sockeye salmon.

In 2010, EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson identified building tribal partnerships an agency priority. She has stood by this commitment and traveled throughout Alaska to hear from tribal communities.

### **Bristol Bay Tribes**

There are 31 federally-recognized tribal governments in the Bristol Bay area, 17 of which are in the Kvichak and Nushagak watersheds. The salmon runs of Bristol Bay serve as a major subsistence food source to those tribes and provide many native people with income and an important cultural link.

Nine tribes and other stakeholders petitioned EPA in May 2010 asking the agency to take action to protect Bristol Bay from large-scale development, specifically the proposed Pebble Mine. These tribes asked EPA to take immediate protective measures to prohibit or restrict permits for metallic sulfide mining in Bristol Bay. Other tribes have asked the agency to withhold action and allow a regular permitting process and environmental review of any mining proposals.

In response to these competing requests, EPA is meeting with Bristol Bay tribal communities, governments and corporations and listening to all perspectives as it determines if there are proactive actions EPA should take to protect the Bristol Bay watershed and its salmon resources. When EPA hosted its first meeting of technical experts in August 2011, six tribes were at the table. Continued tribal input is a vital component of the assessment.

### **Traditional Knowledge**

Tribes have special knowledge of the Bristol Bay watersheds because they have lived there for thousands of years. EPA has two anthropologists with extensive experience in Alaska on its team to incorporate traditional knowledge in the assessment.

The information gathered from the tribes includes ecological, nutritional, social and spiritual knowledge. EPA is also examining case studies of populations whose lives were closely linked to salmon and what the impacts were to those populations when their salmon resources were depleted.

### **Government to Government Relationship**

EPA has obligations to work with tribes in a government-to-government relationship on agency decisions or activities that impact them. The concept of tribes as sovereign nations was written into the United States Constitution and has been affirmed by the courts, Congress and the President.

The tribal governments in Bristol Bay have an opportunity to engage the U.S. government on decisions impacting Bristol Bay resources in a process called tribal consultation.

EPA is engaging tribes in official government-to-government meetings as part of the Bristol Bay watershed assessment. The agency is also holding discussions and informational community meetings with tribal members, tribal village corporations and non-profit organizations. EPA is available to talk with any entity upon request.

The agency's engagement with tribes is a consistent thread in the assessment from start to finish. As year-round, lifelong residents, Alaska Native villages have a great stake in Bristol Bay's future.

For more information on EPA's tribal consultation and coordination policy, visit:

<http://www.epa.gov/indian/pdf/cons-and-coord-with-indian-tribes-policy.pdf>

### **SIDEBAR 1: EPA's Conversations with Tribes**

EPA officials have made many visits to engage with Alaska tribes since launching the Bristol Bay Watershed Assessment. The Agency has made 12 visits to eight different villages and has held meetings in Alaska, Seattle and Washington D.C. with attendance from a substantial number of people from tribes all around Bristol Bay.

Agency officials who have visited include EPA Regional Administrator Dennis McLerran; EPA's Assistant Administrator for Water, Nancy Stoner; and the EPA Administrator's Senior Counsel, Bob Sussman. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson visited Dillingham to discuss Bristol Bay and mining before EPA initiated its assessment.

Below is a list of tribes and groups EPA has connected with:

- Alaska Peninsula Corporation
- Aleknagik Village
- Bristol Bay Native Corporation
- Clark's Point Village
- Curyung Village
- Ekwok Village
- Igiugig Village
- Iliamna Development Corporation
- Iliamna Natives Limited

- Kokhanok Village
- Koliganek Village
- Lake and Peninsula Borough
- Levelock
- Levelock Natives Association
- Naknek Village
- National Tribal Operations Committee: Rick doesn't remember meeting with them. Let's check this before it's on the list. I got it out of the Word document chart listing all these meetings.
- National Tribal Water Council
- New Stuyahok Village
- Newhalen Village
- Nondalton Village
- Nuna Resources Inc.
- Nunamta Aulukestai
- Paug-vik Village
- Pedro Bay Native Corp
- Portage Creek Village
- Togiak Village

## **SIDEBAR 2: The Role of Traditional Ecological Knowledge**

Traditional Ecological Knowledge is a system of understanding one's environment based on observations and experience. It is built over generations as people depend on the land and sea for their food, materials, and culture.

Scientists recognize the value of working with people who live in an area and who have great insight into the natural processes at work in that area. While the scientific perspective is often different from the traditional perspective, both have a great deal to offer one another. Working together is the best way of helping us achieve a better common understanding of nature.